

Field Report

Padre Island National Seashore

■ 1.0 Summary

The Padre Island National Seashore was established in 1962 as a unit of the National Park Service (NPS). Padre Island National Seashore was established “to save and preserve, for the purposes of public recreation, benefit, and inspiration a portion of the diminishing seashore of the United States that remains undeveloped.” The Seashore contains the longest stretch of undeveloped ocean beach in the country. The Gulf of Mexico shore – the Laguna Madre offshore resources – and Padre Island itself, with its different natural zones – make up a dynamic ecological system that demonstrates barrier island processes. The Park contains essential or critical habitats for significant wildlife such as threatened and endangered migratory birds and sea turtles (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Padre Island National Seashore



Cultural resources on the Seashore, including prehistoric sites, the Underwater Archaeological District, and the Novillo Line Camp (a cattle ranch located near Malaquite Beach, which was built in the 1800s and is not currently open to visitors) help to explain the long continuity of human history in the region to the Island’s visitors. The Island also provides excellent opportunities for a wide range of seashore recreation with its stretches of undeveloped beaches, high-quality visual resources, and other significant resources. Padre Island is known nationally and internationally for its recreational opportunities.

Opportunities to apply alternative transportation systems (ATS) to transportation problems within the Park primarily address the following issues:

- Significant potential recreational resources within the Park are underutilized because of lack of access. Examples include the Novillo Line Camp, which requires restoration before access would be permitted to visitors, and several exceptional birding opportunities;
- The Park is not accessible by public transit, therefore, many potential users within the region are not able to utilize the resources;
- Signage related to the Park is inadequate, particularly along the primary route from Corpus Christi. Tourists to the area would be more apt to visit the Park if it were well-publicized and easier to find; and
- Parking at Bird Island Basin, one of the most popular destinations within the Park, is not adequate.

Potential ATS needs have been identified for this site as follows:

- Establish new pedestrian boardwalks within the Park to provide controlled access to underutilized resources such as the Novillo Line Camp and the diverse bird habitats on the Island.
- Provide regularly scheduled rubber-tired shuttle service between a new “shuttle stop” at the Malaquite Visitor’s Center parking area and Bird Island Basin with stops at the foot of the new birding trail mentioned above, the entrance to the Malaquite campground, the new Novillo Line Camp boardwalk, and the foot of the Grasslands Nature Trail (see Figure 2).
- Provide better directional signage within the Park and off-site informational (changeable) signage along U.S. 37 for patrons to indicate when parking at Bird Island Basin is full. Provide alternative parking areas and shuttle service such as the Malaquite shuttle mentioned above.
- Establish a regularly scheduled transit service (such as a rubber-tired trolley) from downtown tourist district in Corpus Christi to the new Malaquite Visitor’s Center shuttle stop in the Park. Service could consist of a public/private venture with stops at participating businesses and major activity centers along the route. Vehicles should include accommodations for bicycle patrons. Opportunities to transfer to a “beach shuttle” from other routes are available at the Flour Bluff Transfer Center, which is served by buses from the Corpus Christi Regional Transportation Authority and is located between Corpus Christi and the National Seashore.
- Provide bicycle path within telephone and utility easements to the Island and provide dedicated bicycle access on the paved roadway within Padre Island.

Figure 2. Seashore Entrance

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

The Padre Island National Seashore is located on Padre Island, on the Gulf of Mexico, southeast of the city of Corpus Christi, Texas (see Figure 3). Visitors to the site travel east through the city on South Padre Island Drive (Highway 358). After crossing the JFK Causeway and the bridge onto Padre Island, visitors continue about 10 miles south on Park Road 22 to reach Padre Island (see Figure 4). The site falls into the counties of Kleberg and Kennedy in the state of Texas.

Figure 3. Region/Vicinity – Padre Island National Seashore

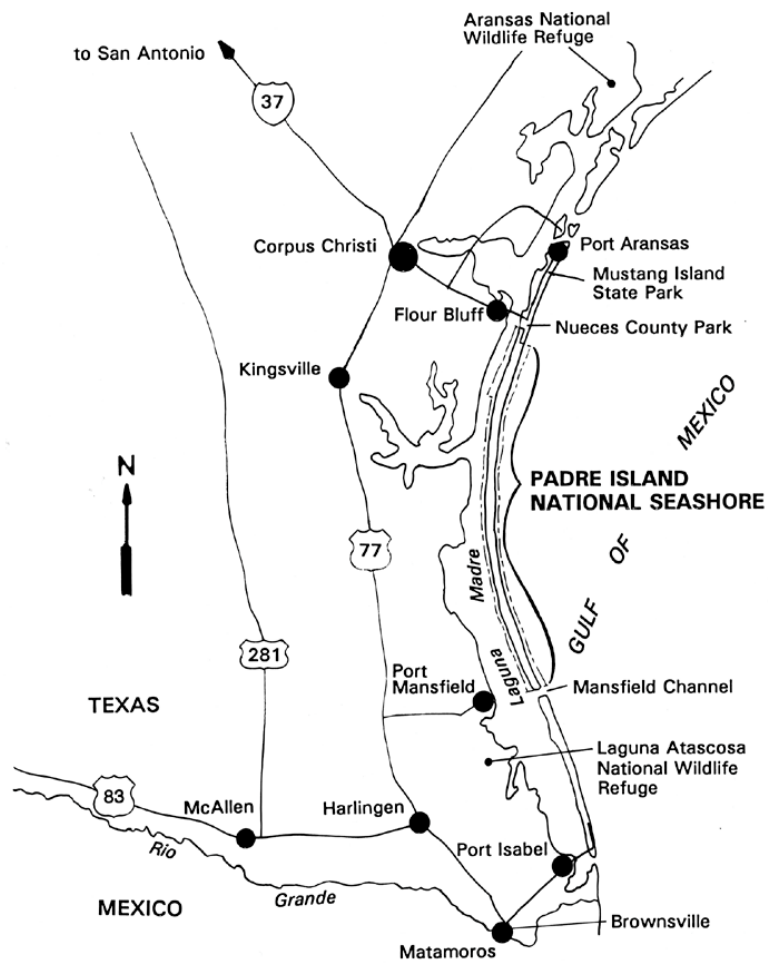
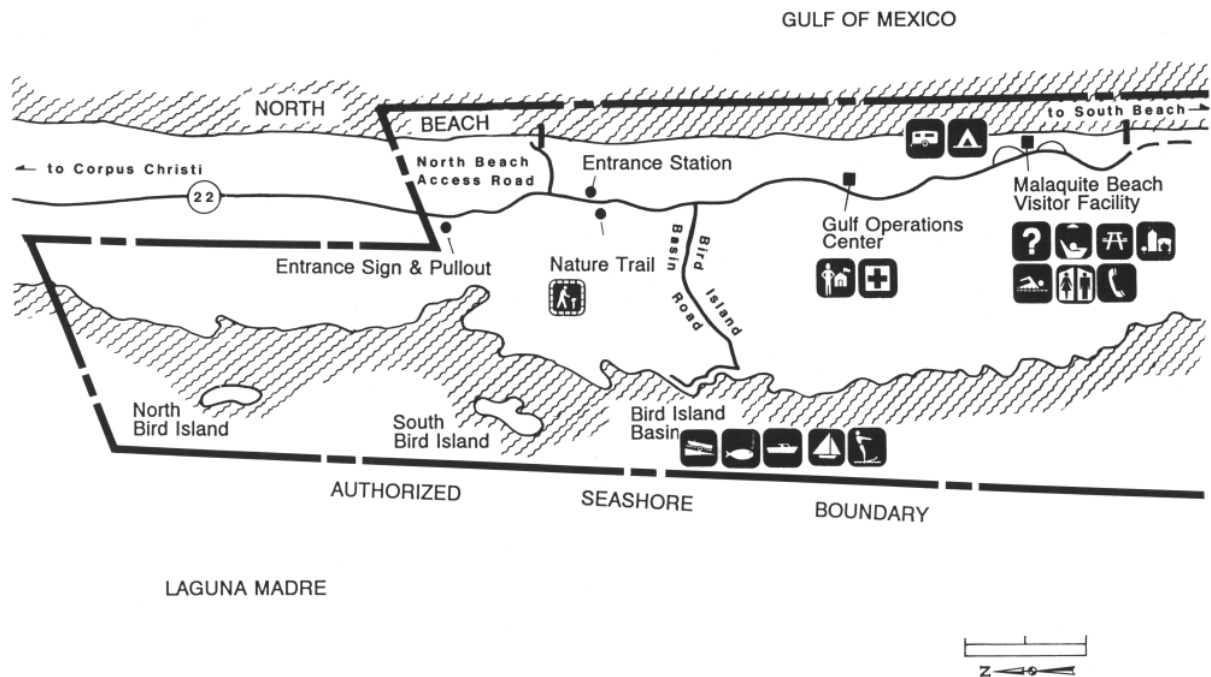


Figure 4. Main Facilities

2.2 Administration and Classification

Padre Island National Seashore was established by an act of Congress on September 28, 1962. It is administered by the NPS.

2.3 Physical Description

Padre Island National Seashore encompasses 133,000 acres of America's vanishing barrier islands. It is the longest remaining undeveloped barrier island in the world. White sand beaches (see Figure 5), interior grasslands, ephemeral ponds and the Laguna Madre provide habitat for coyotes, waterfowl, reptiles and amphibians, nesting sea turtles, ground squirrels and snakes. While providing food, water, and shelter for a multitude of diverse wildlife, the Island remains a mecca for tourists. From sunbathing to windsurfing to fishing, the Island provides recreational opportunities for a variety of visitors.

Figure 5. Beach



2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Seashore

Padre Island National Seashore was established “to save and preserve, for the purposes of public recreation, benefit, and inspiration a portion of the diminishing seashore of the United States that remains undeveloped.” The 1983 General Management Plan/Development Concept Plan states that “Padre Island National Seashore preserves a dynamic barrier island ecosystem that offers outstanding opportunities for shoreline recreation, natural history study, and contemplation of past and present uses of the coastline.”

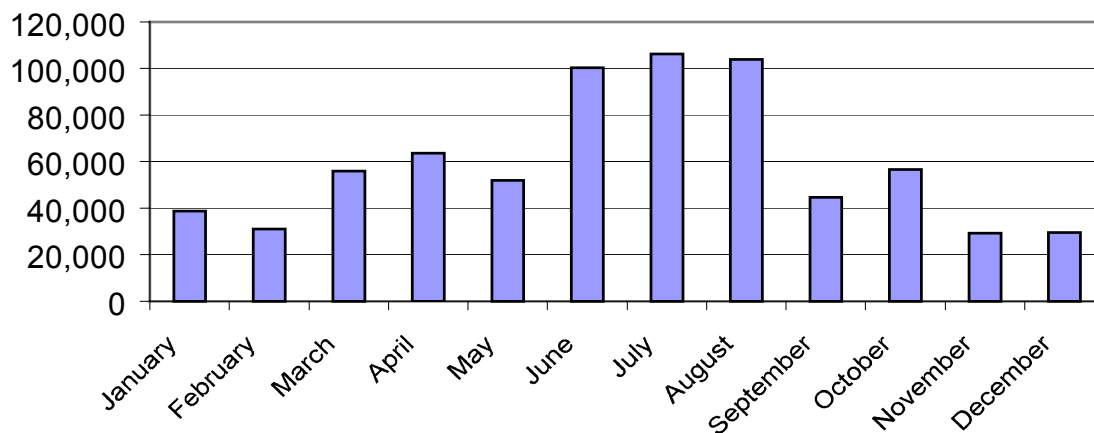
The management goals for the Park reflect the NPS’ intention to provide for recreational and interpretive uses that are compatible with the preservation of the natural environment and consistent with the legislative purpose of the Park. Padre Island National Seashore staff intend to:

- Provide the diversity of the Park visitors (including those with disabilities) with a range of recreational opportunities and experiences in a manner compatible with the protection of the natural and cultural resources;
- Preserve the integrity of the Park’s natural and cultural resources;
- Promote visitor and employee safety and accessibility, and reduce conflicts between the various recreational activities;
- Avoid, to the extent possible, the long- and short-term impacts associated with the occupancy and modification of barrier island floodplains and the destruction or modification of wetlands;
- Encourage a continuing research program that will provide staff with information needed for interpretation and management of the natural and cultural aspects of the Park;
- Encourage appreciation of the Park’s resources by providing opportunities for all interested visitors to be involved in interpretive, recreational, and resource-oriented programs;

- Heighten public awareness of local, regional, and global environmental concerns through in-park and outreach educational and interpretive efforts;
- Continue to provide the public with opportunities for a range of experiences, including recreation in a social setting, and appreciation of the Park resources in relative solitude;
- Maintain and foster close relations and cooperation with governmental and non-governmental entities and individuals who have an interest in the Park and its surroundings;
- Provide visitors with a varied and balanced range of interpretive opportunities that offer insights into the natural and cultural values of the Park;
- Fulfill the commitment to owners of the mineral estate by ensuring their ability to recover the reserved oil and gas mineral resources with a minimum of environmental consequences; and
- Continue to work with the concessionaire to provide high-quality visitor facilities and services.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Padre Island National Seashore receives over 900,000 visitors per year. Most of these visitors are from Texas (63 percent are local residents and 20 percent are regional). Fifteen percent of visitors come from other states in the U.S., and two percent come from other countries. Most visitors (60 percent) come with their families and most are day visitors (83 percent). Visitors are interested primarily in recreation, and only a small percentage participates in interpretive programs. Visitor profiles and use patterns vary greatly with the seasons. Use is greatest during the spring and summer. Figure 6 illustrates month by month visitation levels during 1998.

Figure 6. 1998 Monthly Visits

The features of the various barrier island environments largely determine the type of experience or activity pursued by visitors. Bird Island Basin is extremely popular, providing within a relatively small area, recreational opportunities unique within the Park and in the Corpus Christi area. Various user groups, with different and often conflicting resource and facility needs, use the same area. Major types of use are power boating, sailing, surfboarding, camping, sail-line fishing, snorkeling, wading, and bird watching.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The paved park road terminates just south of Malaquite Beach. From the road terminus to a point 5.5 miles south, the beach is hard and accessible by both two- and four-wheel-drive vehicles. Beyond that point it is accessible only by four-wheel-drive vehicles (see Figure 7), therefore that portion of the Island is visited less frequently. Vehicle access is permitted as beaches in Texas are classified as State roads.

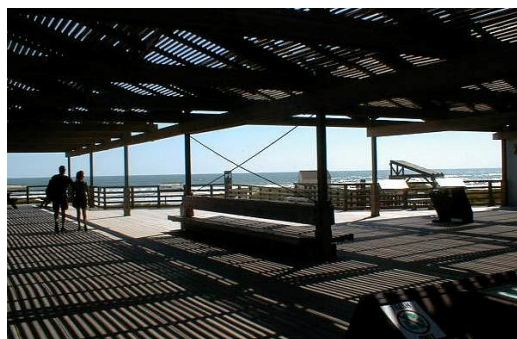
Figure 7. Vehicle Tracks on Beach



A three-quarter-mile self-guided, unpaved nature trail and paved parking area are situated off the park road just south of the entrance station. This is the only designated trail for public use within the Park, providing the only developed access to the interior grasslands.

The Malaquite complex includes an NPS visitor center, concessionaire gift and food sales, restrooms, shade structure (see Figure 8), rinse-off showers, life-guard stations, and a boardwalk ramp to the groomed Gulf Shore Beach. No vehicles are allowed on this 4.5-mile stretch of beach. The Malaquite facility is accessed from Route 10, and paved parking for 1,150 cars is provided. Rarely is more than 20 percent of the lot in use at one time. A paved 40-site campground is situated on the fore dune north of the Malaquite facility. This campground has restroom and shower facilities and a dump station nearby, but does not have RV hook-ups. The previous 64-site beach level loop of this campground was obliterated by hurricane Allen. The existing campground includes a campfire circle where evening interpretive talks are held.

Figure 8. Malaquite Shade Structure



A four-wheel-drive road inland from the gulf beach, 15 miles south of Malaquite, leads to Yarborough Pass, where primitive campsites are available.

Bird Island Basin is the major public access to the Laguna Madre within the Park, and it is one of the primary destination points within the Park. Although a geographically small area, it is the only easily accessible developed recreational area within the Park located on the Laguna Madre shore. (Yarborough Pass is accessible only by boat or four-wheel-drive vehicles.)

The existing paved Bird Island Basin road provides access to the hard-packed Bird Island Basin shoreline road. The hard-packed road connects the asphalt road to the existing boat ramp and is maintained with a caliche material.

The shoreline road, connecting the asphalt Bird Island Basin access road to the boat dock and parking area, is bordered on the south and east by inactive wind-tidal flats, and on the north and west by the Laguna Madre shoreline.

Because of accelerated erosion, the original two-lane road has deteriorated to a single lane. Wooden bollards were installed to define traffic corridors and protect upland vegetation. However, occasionally the wind-tidal flats and upland areas, which are sensitive to surface disturbances, have been used by visitors as an expanded recreational use zone. Parking at Bird Island Basin is not adequate and frequently reaches capacity. Current plans call for expanding parking from 55 spaces to 98 spaces.

Although Padre Island National Seashore is an important attraction for visitors to the Corpus Christi region, the lack of public transportation to the Park makes access difficult for some potential user groups. For example, there is no public transportation available for potential patrons and volunteers from the nearby university (Texas A&M at Corpus Christi).

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The city of Corpus Christi is the 56th largest city in the United States with an estimated population of about 281,000 (1998). Tourism is a very important element of the local economy. Approximately five million people visit the Corpus Christi Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) each year. About 70 percent of the visitors are from Texas. Of the visitors from out of state, approximately 17 percent come from northern Mexico. Visitors spend nearly \$550 million annually in the Corpus Christi MSA. Tourism creates 8,700 jobs and more than \$136 million in payroll in the area per year.

Within that context, the Park is not as well publicized as it could be. There is little recognition of the Park by other tourist service providers (e.g., rental car agencies, airport, hotels, etc.). Other community development issues include:

- There is no access to South Padre Island from the Park.
- The “winter Texan” population in the area is growing. This group represents a large pool of potential park patrons.
- Increasing the emphasis on potential attractions such as bird watching and cultural resources within the Park could capitalize on previously underutilized recreational opportunities and attract more visitors to the Padre Island National Seashore.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Enhancing interpretive opportunities at cultural resource sites within the Park such as Novillo Line camp could attract more visitors. Increased utilization of these resources could help to justify increased investment in preserving and protecting the resources.

Padre Island National Seashore faces environmental problems from the enormous amount of waste that is washed up onto its beaches from the Gulf of Mexico. The initial three miles of the Island are raked on a regular basis to provide a clean environment for visitors, but limited resources and a concern for animal life along the remaining miles of beach, prohibit systematic raking and cleaning.

3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Primary user groups could be classified into the following categories:

- Malaquite Beach users – Swimming and recreational activities associated with the beach; visitor center and interpretive exhibits; RV’s; campground; and concessions.
- Boaters – Bird Island Basin access to Laguna Madre; parking is limited.
- Windsurfers – Bird Island Basin access to Laguna Madre; the Island is rated the third best windsurfing spot in the country.
- Down Island users – Fishing and beach-combing; access is difficult and limited to four-wheel-drives.
- Birders – The Island could become a primary destination for birders. Current birding visitors are typically day-use patron. Many threatened and endangered species can be spotted on the Island; no facilities are currently available to access some of the assorted habitat types.

Padre Island National Seashore requires an entrance fee. There is a cost of \$10.00 per vehicle, which is valid for seven days. Pedestrians and bicyclists are charged \$5.00 for a seven-day period. Commercial tours pay a flat fee, based upon bus capacity. There is a daily fee of \$5.00 or an annual fee of \$10.00 for use of Bird Island Basin. Camping at Malaquite Campground requires a payment of \$8.00 per day.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

Key planning documents that are currently in use include the Parkwide Development Concept Plan and Environmental Assessment dated 1995 and the Oil and Gas Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement in draft form from 1999. These documents supplement the 1983 version of the National Seashore's General Management Plan.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The Park Service staff at Padre Island National Seashore work closely in coordinating activities and resources with a number of public agencies and interest groups. Coordination efforts involve:

- Teaching programs at the Texas State Aquarium;
- Working with Texas Parks & Wildlife and Kleberg and Kennedy County officials to coordinate enforcement issues;
- Interagency coordination regarding dredging of federal waters;
- Cooperating with Mustang Island State Park and Nueces County Park officials;
- Membership and Information sharing with Padre Island Business Association, Greater Coastal Bend Tourism Council, Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce and Flour Bluff Business Association;
- Coordination efforts with Coastal Conservation Association;
- Working with several universities across the U.S. interested in the unique educational opportunities provided by the Park;
- Relationship with the U.S. Coast Guard (U.S. CG);
- On-site turtle research with the U.S. CG; and
- Relationships through the Oil and Gas Management Plan with oil and gas companies as well as owners of private mineral rights.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

ATs have significant potential to increase usage of the Padre Island National Seashore and to enhance the experience of those who visit the Park. The potential improvements range from relatively inexpensive signage improvements to more costly scheduled transit service. The alternatives, summarized below, help increase the Park's utilization and its attractiveness as a visitor destination.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

- Provide better directional signage for the Park, particularly along U.S. Highway 37 from Corpus Christi.
- Provide regularly scheduled shuttle service between a new “shuttle stop” at the Malaquite Visitor's Center parking area and the Bird Island Basin area, with stops at the foot of the new birding trail mentioned above, the entrance to the Malaquite campground, the new Novillo Line Camp boardwalk, and the foot of the Grasslands Nature Trail. Half-hour service during daytime hours would be adequate if good informational services are provided. The Park may consider testing the demand on summer weekends before instituting daily service. (Shuttle service may be difficult for some patrons such as windsurfers because of their equipment requirements).
- Establish a regularly scheduled transit service (such as a rubber-tired trolley) from downtown tourist district in Corpus Christi to the Malaquite Visitor's Center shuttle stop in the Park. Service could consist of a public/private venture with stops at participating businesses and major activity centers along the route. Vehicles should include accommodations for bicycle patrons. Opportunities to transfer to a “beach shuttle” from other routes are available at the Flour Bluff Transfer Center.
- Establish a new pedestrian boardwalk and birding trail from the Malaquite Beach area to the Laguna Madre side of the Island. The route could traverse several different types of habitat, and could provide the facilities necessary to better market the Park's birding potential.
- Establish a new pedestrian boardwalk trail at the Novillo Line Camp and provide accompanying interpretive exhibits and displays.
- Provide off-site informational (changeable) signage along U.S. 37 for patrons to indicate when parking at Bird Island Basin is full. Provide alternative parking areas and shuttle service such as the Malaquite shuttle mentioned above.
- Provide bicycle path within telephone and utility easements to the Island, and provide dedicated bicycle lanes on paved roadways within the Park.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

Draft Oil and Gas Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement for Padre Island National Seashore, February 1999.

Padre Island National Seashore – Parkwide Development Concept Plan and Environmental Assessment, Public Draft, January 1995.

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Padre Island National Seashore, General Management Plan/Development Concept Plan, April 1983.

Padre Island National Seashore, visitation information, 1991 and 1999.

■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

Jock Whitworth, Superintendent, Padre Island National Seashore

Darrell Echols, Chief, Resources Management, Padre Island National Seashore

Betty Frantum, Administrative Officer, Padre Island National Seashore

John Gibson, Facility Manager, Padre Island National Seashore

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Char Beltran, Vice President, Greater Corpus Christi Business Alliance